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ABSTRACT

Oppositional feminist ethnography does have something to offer those in adult education. Because adult educators adhere to a mission of social justice, concern over issues of power, knowledge construction, positionality, identity, and voice have become more prevalent. Although discourses dealing with equity are increasing, those in the field still lack research methodologies for countering the depth and breadth of social inequities in society. Oppositional feminist ethnography may be a mode of analysis that begins to fill the gap. First, through its oppositional stance and contextual application, it offers a methodological framework with the potential to break normative bounds and incorporate multiple layers of complexity, freeing individuals from the boxes of certainty in which they work. Second, it gives a methodological grounding for using the more disruptive discourse of post-colonialism, post-structuralism, post-modernism, and high modernism and strategies to use these theories. Third, use of these theories as multiple lenses of analysis encourages proliferation of difference and shattering of totalities. Fourth, as the notion of power is embedded in the discourse and not analyzed solely in isolation, oppositional feminist ethnography extends beyond a binary analysis of power to a multidimensional analysis. Finally, it offers a mode of analysis that shifts the attention of adult education as a technical problem to that of a social problem. (Contains 17 references.) (YLB)

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Oppositional Feminist Ethnography: What Does It Have To Offer Adult Education?

Jodi Kaufmann
University of Georgia, USA

Abstract: In this paper I struggle to understand oppositional feminist ethnography and examine what it may offer us in Adult Education, as it appears to have the propensity to multiply difference and deal with complexity without collapsing it into the normative.

Storying ourselves has been practiced since antiquity. It is a discursive practice formulated to construct meaning out of the boundless chaos of experience, a practice that defines, limits, and binds, signifying that which may be articulated and knowable from the abyss of the unsayable and the inconceivable. Oppositional feminist ethnography, those ethnographic theories and practices that attempt to deconstruct hegemony in different ways through forefronting alternate dimensions of power, may be understood as such a story. Although there is no concrete definition of this methodology, there appears to be a nebulous common ground that permeates it. I, as a white, middle-class female, desire to grasp a theoretical understanding of oppositional feminist ethnography in order to access its potentials and adequately defend its application, for it appears to have the propensity not only to multiply difference, but also to deal with complexity without collapsing it into the normative. As our methods for disrupting hegemony and multiplying differences are proliferating in the field of Adult Education, the encountering of this discourse has raised for me the question: "Is oppositional feminist ethnography a methodological tool that not only aligns with our social vision, but one which may propel its exercise?" Sparked by this probable potential, in the following, I will share a synthesis of my reading of oppositional feminist ethnography structured around four of the discourses' reoccurring themes: power, the construction of knowledge, positionality and identity, and textual experimentation, and conclude by examining what oppositional feminist ethnography may have to offer us in the field of Adult Education.

Power

All knowledge is created, maintained, and deconstructed within a matrix of power relations. These relations of power penetrate as well as create every encounter, and visa versa. Thus, it becomes impossible to separate power from the following discourse; as power always operates in advance (Butler, 1993) it saturates every signification herein. Therefore, although the notion of power was at first to form its own category, this attempt was deleted. As I tried to disentangle power from the construction of knowledge, positionality, and textual experimentation, the subject continually could not be detached from the object. This refusal, perhaps, signifies that knowledge and power are dialectical discourses, positionality is situated in matrix of power, and textual formation is determined by and formed as a response to power. The analyses of these relationships of power in oppositional feminist ethnography have moved beyond the binary and have extended to the multidimensional which interpolates all forms

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of discourse. Therefore, the notion of power remains embedded within this text as it remains embedded within discourse. It may be noted in every section, every paragraph, every word, for not only is the whole of experience existent in these relations, oppositional feminist ethnography is primarily concerned with these issues.

Construction Of Knowledge

The construction of knowledge in conventional ethnography, as it is underpinned by anthropology and thus structuralism, is primarily constructed under positivism (Crotty, 1998). This epistemological framework presupposes a concrete "reality" to be discovered and a one-to-one correspondence between language and "reality." Most oppositional feminist ethnographers argue that this understanding is insufficient to interpret the multiple, shifting realties of experience. In oppositional feminist ethnography, knowledge is primarily seen as an intersubjective social construction formed through continual encounters with all forms of discourse. Due to these altering views of knowledge, oppositional feminist ethnographers often critique the epistemological grounding of conventional ethnography.

Many of these critiques focuses on the unifying and generalizing epistemes that underpin conventional ethnography. Visweswaran (1994) notes that "Theory", signed as "Theory", generalizes from the narrow, signifies the temporal as timeless, and becomes synonymous with the idea of original thought. By focusing on theoretical principles and structures that unite, contextually and historically, the changing commitments and actions of peoples and cultures, ethnography as underpinned by conventional anthropology, according to Trinh (1989), attempts to transform the chaotic, wild, sensational, and unaccountable into the well ordered, the law ordered. Abu-Lugod (1993) sees this phenomena perpetuated through the practice of collecting diverse experiences and facts that are selected, gathered, and detached from their original temporal occasions and given enduring value in a new arrangement under the rubric of "culture". Behar (1993) asserts that it is additionally facilitated by inductive proceedings that generalize the particular and erase difference, as well as serve to free the privileged from guilt and responsibility through this universal signification.

The unification and generalization of normative historical description has also been critiqued. Normative history is the traditional representation of history, which analyzes past events and searches for similarities and cohesive genres in order to present historical totalities absent of difference, eruptions, and gaps. According to Visweswaran (1994), this representation, which accompanies most traditional ethnographies, shields the moments of cognitive failure and creates the impression that one has provided a satisfactory interpretation. This shielding is, according to Spivak (1996), an actively sanctioned ignorance, a fictitious knowledge, and a form of colonial domination. To resist this tendency, Tsing (1993) asserts that an ethnographer should move beyond normative historical description and

The knowledge created in conventional ethnography is also critiqued for being constructed on binary oppositions that privilege the antecedent (Trinh, 1989). These formations, such as, First world/Third world and male/female, are based on an interpretation that not only flattens multiple contextual manifestations, but subjugates and marginalizes the subsequent term. This construction creates a discourse of disenfranchised "other" which solidifies the center and acts as a unifying force to reify the us/them binary necessary for hegemonic domination. According to Tsing (1993), "other" is predicated on the construction of "self" in the same manner in which the construction of the First World is only

Several suggestions have been proposed for deconstructing binary relations. Trinh (1989) suggests the reversal of such binaries, while Spivak (1996) calls for the continual displacement of these arrangements in order that privilege/subjugation cannot solidify. Tsing (1993) notes, on the other hand, that binary

representation may not be as simple as assumed, for the separating of the subject from object becomes convoluted, as upon analysis the subject shifts between subject, object, you and neither you.

Oppositional feminist ethnographers have also critiqued the view that knowledge is objective and capable of universal validity claims. Many of these researchers assert that knowledge is situational, constructed in and for specific contexts; it is relational, produced in the intersections of multiple relations, and partial, always subjective and never all-encompassing. Multiple interpretations of events, therefore, must be sought in order to deconstruct the "objective", and therefore oppressive, interpretation. Thus, the conscious pursuit of the divergent in the apparent homogeneous, the connection in the apparent gaps, must ground ethnographic analysis (Tsing, 1993). As Tsing implies, the different and the similar are not necessarily dichotomic. In an attempt to deconstruct objective knowledge claims on a global level, Tsing (1993) suggests situating local commentaries within wider negotiations of meaning and power and at the same time recognizing the local stakes and specificities. This implies, according to Cole (1995), the need to insert the subject into the subjective realm of history and politics.

Positionality And Identity

Conventional ethnography tends to understand the individual as being singularly and autonomously located. Oppositional ethnography, on the other hand, assumes identities are created in the intersection of multiple discursive fields (Tsing, 1993) -- race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, political context, social context, geographical location, temporal location, etc. Identity configuration depends on the discursive possibilities available and change over time according to the political context and historical connotations of identifiers (Zavella, 1996). Identity, thus, becomes constituted in the midst of multiple power relations. According to Williams (1996), these relations of power shape how and to what extent an identity can be affixed; but they do not shape to what extent it is fixed. In other words, one's identity is not a totality, but a partial representation of multiple discourses (Visweswaran, 1994). This partiality requires as well as predicates the continual shifting of one's positionality. Consequently, according to Narayan (1997), different aspects of identity become highlighted at different times, depending on the context and prevailing vectors of power. Identity, in this reading, signifies a contextual, shifting, partial location that is continuously formed and reformed. Due to this nebulous formation, Hsiung (1996) has deemed binary analyses of the traditional anthropological relationship -- insider/outsider, researcher/researched, colonizer/colonized, male/female, First world/Third world, etc. -- too simplistic, because they produce linear dichotomies which do not leave room to explore how power structures are constructed and contested in everyday life.

Textual Experimentation

Within the framework of oppositional feminist ethnography, genres are not read as objective constructions signifying "Truth;" genres are textual discourses that are geographically and temporally located. Constituted in space and time, and constructed in the intersections of multiple discourses, genres are continually shifting commodities (Gordon, 1995). The text cannot be separated from the complex web of social relationships (Hernandez, 1995); they are contextual, determined by the situation and problems addressed (Abu-Lughod, 1993). Juxtaposed to the scientific discourse, which is condemned for trafficking in generalizations and using details and particulars of individual lives to produce typification, making "other" seem more coherent and self contained and different from ourselves (Abu-Lughod, 1993); these texts attempt to deconstruct the homogeneous, the essentialized, the fixed. According to Tsing (1993), they attempt to use stories to show sites of discursive contestation to hegemony (Tsing, 1993).

This form of writing may be seen as an attempt to deconstruct the humanistic text. It is contextualized as polyvocal and multiple rather than singular. It is a writing of the body versus a composition of the mind.

It constitutes the emotional versus the rational. It blurs the boundaries of genres instead of remaining genre distinctive. It decenters the authority of the author rather than privileging the text as truth. It focuses on deconstruction rather than construction. Its articulations are of the private rather than the public and professional. It is noted for the repression of desire rather than the expression of ambition. The circular and the temporal are privileged over the chronological. And finally, according to Visweswaran (1994), it emphasizes the subject split into both subject and object, as a discourse continually in the process of construction in order to discourage the identification of the reader with a unified subject of enunciation rather than presenting a closed objective unification.

As the boundaries between genres have become continually blurred, the demarcation between scholarly writing and fiction has become fragmented. Behar (1993) believes that fiction, as ethnography is less distancing and dichotomizing than the conventional ethnographic text. Harrison (1995) feels ethnic/minority fiction, not just autobiography, is a salient ethnographic genre. Fiction, she notes, has served as a means of critical exploration into cultural, psychological, and historical dilemmas. To illustrate her stance, she analyzes Walker's *Temple of My Familiar* and notes the following aspects of its construction: the biofocality (seeing others against the background of ourselves and ourselves against the background of others), the multiple realities, the interlinguistic play, the emphasis on dialogue and discourse, the weaving together of precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial contexts of gender, race and class oppression, the combination of myth, memory, and magical, the encounter between formal knowledge production and common knowledge.

Textual experimentation, according to Narayan (1997), asks that stories have no conclusion, for concluding restores the superiority of the interpretive/analytical mode being questioned by the very construction of these narratives and reestablishes the familiar authority of the expert voice. Therefore, Narayan calls for a dispersal of analytical conclusion in order to diminish the authoritative power and potential of the text and to allow analysis to overflow analytic categories. Also speaking of the dominative force of language, Behar (1993) notes that many Third World women advocate using language as a tool to resist and subvert dominant representation. This usage is evasive; she asserts it is an articulating across borders, an emphasizing of the fluidity between history/story, reality/fiction, countries/country, self/other, an inverting of hegemonic assumptions, a noting of history as text and the colonization of the act storytelling.

Conclusion

In light of the above synthesis, I want to return to the question, "What does oppositional feminist ethnography have to offer us in the field of Adult Education?" As many of us in the field of Adult Education adhere to a mission of social justice, the concern over issues of power, knowledge construction, positionality, identity, and voice have become more prevalent. Although discourses dealing with equity have been increasing, we still lack research methodologies for countering the depth and breath of social inequities in our society. Oppositional feminist ethnography may be one mode of analysis that begins to fill this gap. First of all, through its oppositional stance and its contextual application, it offers us a methodological framework that has the potential to break normative bounds and incorporate multiple layers of complexity, thus freeing us from the boxes of certainty in which we work. Second, it gives us a methodological grounding for utilizing the more disruptive discourse of post-colonialism, poststructuralism, postmodernism, and high modernism, as well as suggested strategies by which to employ these theories. The mode of application for these strategies is contextual, shifting in the circumstance of application; therefore, these strategies avoid becoming concrete methods and may continue to grow in their oppositional tendencies through the imagination of the ethnographer. Third, the use of these theories as multiple lenses of analysis encourage the proliferation of difference and the shattering of totalities, the neat conceptualizations that bury difference in metanarratives (Lyotard, 1997). Fourth, as the notion of power is embedded in the discourse and not analyzed solely in

isolation, oppositional feminist ethnography extends beyond a binary analysis of power to a multi-dimensional analysis. Also, as it conceptualizes the construction of knowledge as a co-production, it forefronts marginal voices. Additionally, it pushes the boundaries of the comfortable, continually reversing and blurring assumptions to which we may be blind, thus continually disrupting the normative, which disenfranchises the "other." And finally, it offers a mode of analysis that shifts the attention of Adult Education as a technical problem to that of a social problem.

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